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ABSTRACT

In the late 1990s the Texas Education Agency advocated the transformation of all counseling services into developmental guidance programs. This document describes the process undertaken and the lessons learned when evaluating a small, rural school district in north Texas in order to begin this model transformation. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the pre-transformation counseling services through the eyes of school administrators, students, teachers, counselors, and parents. Information was derived from surveys, interviews, and time logs. The evaluation accomplished several tasks necessary for comparing current services with those in the newly developed guidance plan. It also resulted in some changes at the district level. These are discussed, along with lessons learned that might improve a future evaluation. (ADT)

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by

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Chapter Two

Evaluation of Counseling Services in a Rural School District: *Assessing Current Program Status*

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Historically, counseling services have been considered ancillary to school functioning. This attitude was reinforced by the pseudo-clerical activities performed by many counselors and resulted in counselors being assigned various non-guidance duties, given that they had no clear focus, had a flexible schedule, and were already involved in other ancillary tasks (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000). However, as a result of Gysbers' and Moore's (1974) landmark work, ancillary programs across the nation began being transformed into organized and comprehensive programs. In Texas, a grant through the Office of Education in 1971 acted as a catalyst for 66 districts to transform their counseling services into developmental guidance programs. This grant also led to the development of *The Comprehensive Guidance Program for Texas Public Schools: A Guide for Program Development: Pre-K–12th Grade* (Texas Education Agency, 1998). This publication, henceforth referred to as the Guide, is based on the comprehensive guidance program model. Although not all Texas schools received grant funding, the state education agency advocated the transformation of all counseling services into developmental guidance programs. To begin, it was necessary to evaluate current services of school districts and then compare them to the developmental guidance model (Gysbers & Henderson, 1997). The following describes the process undertaken and lessons learned when evaluating a relatively small rural school district located in north Texas, in order to begin this model transformation.

Evaluation

Purpose: It was the purpose of this study to evaluate the counseling services, as they existed pre-transformation, through the eyes of school administrators,

students, teachers, counselors, and parents. Qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed to examine the state of and satisfaction with counseling services. Specifically, the following questions were addressed:

1. What are the counselors' roles in the schools?
2. How is the individual counselor's time being divided between the four developmental guidance components—group guidance, responsive services, individual planning, and system support—and how does this allocation compare with the recommendations in the Guide?
3. How do counselors, administrators, teachers, parents, and students perceive counseling services and their effectiveness with students?

Setting: The evaluation occurred in a school district in a small rural town with approximately 25,000 citizens. The overwhelming majority of the population is White (98.6%) with an average household income of approximately $50,000. The school district has nine schools—one high school, one middle school (seventh and eighth grades), one intermediate school (fifth and sixth grades), an alternative school, and five elementary schools. Individuals throughout the district were invited to participate in the study, including the 14 counselors, 329 teachers, 14 school administrators, and 3,400 students and their parents.

Method

An initial meeting was convened with the assistant superintendent, who was also the counselors' supervisor. A second meeting was then conducted with all school counselors in the district to apprise them of the processes necessary for a successful evaluation. During this meeting, one counselor stepped forward and indicated she would be interested in assisting with the evaluation. This counselor played a major role throughout the evaluation process in assembling the counselors and disseminating information as well as apprising the evaluator of the historical aspects of the counseling services.

Instrumentation

In order to determine the community's needs for and satisfaction with counseling services, five different surveys in the form of rating scales were administered, one to each of five groups—parents, elementary students, secondary students, teachers, counselors, and administrators. All surveys were based on those provided by Rye and Sparks (1998) and Fairchild (1994), and were modified through consultation with school counselors. (Copies of the surveys may be obtained by contacting the author.)

Parents and students were matched, so that for those students who received

a survey, their parents also received one. The surveys were mailed to parents with a letter explaining confidentiality, purpose, and procedures. The letter asked parents to complete their survey and to help their children complete theirs. This avoided the cumbersome task of obtaining permission forms from each parent to allow the child to participate in the study.

Parent and student surveys: The parent survey contained eight questions regarding service availability, accessibility, and information dissemination. For each question the parent selected from *yes, no, I don't know,* or *not applicable* responses. The elementary (19 questions) and secondary (12 questions) student surveys addressed counselor availability, relationship skills, and guidance activities using *yes, no,* and *not sure* response categories.

The evaluator resolved to sample 100 students and their parents from each of grades one through eight; the high school administrators volunteered to mail surveys to all the high school students and their parents as part of their monthly newsletter. Classrooms were selected at the elementary, intermediate, and middle school through cluster sampling. Twenty students from each grade level were then randomly selected from the targeted classrooms to receive the parent and student surveys. In total, 1,600 students and parents from the first through eighth grades, and 1,800 high school students and their parents, received surveys.

Of the 500 elementary-level surveys, 314 (63%) of the student surveys and 315 (63%) of the parent surveys were completed and returned. Of the 400 surveys distributed at the intermediate and middle schools, 89 (22%) of the student surveys and 85 (21%) of the parent surveys were completed and returned. Even more disappointing was the response rate to the 1,800 surveys sent to parents and their children at the high school. Only 13 (0.72%) parents and 46 students (2%) completed and returned their surveys.

Teacher survey: The teacher survey was a 13-question, 5-point Likert scale with three open-ended questions regarding the teacher's satisfaction with the counseling program in his or her respective school. The survey was distributed to the 329 teachers in the nine schools to be completed and returned anonymously. Of those distributed, 183 (56%) were completed and returned.

Administrator survey: The administrator survey was a 20-question, 5-point Likert scale with three open-ended questions addressing the counselor's effectiveness with parents, administrators, teachers, and students. All 14 administrators (100%) from the nine schools completed the scale and returned it anonymously to the evaluator in a self-addressed stamped envelope.

Counselor survey: The counselor survey was a 13-question, 5-point Likert scale with three open-ended questions asking the counselors to assess their own skills in working with students, teachers, parents, and administrators. All 14 counselor surveys (100%) were returned anonymously to the evaluator in a

self-addressed stamped envelope.

Interviews: The counselors were also interviewed one-on-one in a semi-structured interview to assess their perceptions about the strengths and needs of the counseling services and the roles they played in their respective schools.

Time logs: In order to examine how much time each counselor spent performing each of the four program components outlined in the Texas model (group guidance, responsive services, individual planning, and support services), the evaluator utilized a form similar to the one Henderson used in her evaluation of the Northside ISD program in San Antonio (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000). Counselors kept the log for a total of four weeks, two weeks in the fall and two weeks in the spring.

Communication of Findings

Fostering participation is an essential part of evaluation and politics in evaluation studies (Worthen, Sanders, & Fitzpatrick, 1997). To accomplish this, the evaluator met with the counselors monthly to provide them with findings to date and obtain their feedback about data validity and reliability. The evaluator also met with the counselors' supervisor (the assistant superintendent) twice during the evaluation to keep her informed of process and procedures. The final written report was provided to all campus administrators, the assistant superintendent, the counselors, and the superintendent of schools. A slide presentation regarding model developmental guidance programs and how the evaluation findings for the district compared to this model was delivered at one of the weekly meetings of central and campus administrators.

Conclusions

This evaluation accomplished several tasks necessary for comparing current services with those specified in the Guide. First, counselors were able to document the amount of time they spent in guidance and non-guidance tasks and compare this with the state model. Second, school administrators and counselors obtained critical information regarding how others perceived guidance services and how they might be improved. Finally, administrators received information about state-of-the-art developmental guidance programs as outlined by the Guide and Gysbers and Henderson (1997). Until this time, the counselors' supervisor had been unaware of the developmental guidance model.

The evaluation has resulted in some changes at the district level. First, assistant principals were employed to work at each elementary school, thus relieving counselors of some administrative tasks. Second, the counselors'

supervisor appointed two lead counselors, one for elementary and one for secondary, to coordinate meetings of counselors and disseminate information. Communication was a strong concern of counselors, so they supported this change as a major step in addressing their concern. To address the same issue, the counselors' supervisor began convening quarterly meetings to discuss pertinent issues in program development and processes. Finally, as a result of these events, the school counselors were able to develop a mission and goals statement for their new counseling program and currently are working on the curriculum.

Several important events, planned and unplanned, allowed this evaluation to accomplish these tasks.

1. By meeting with the assistant superintendent beforehand and gaining her support, the evaluator elicited the full cooperation of principals, who encouraged their teachers to cooperate in gathering information. Building principals also allowed their counselors time to meet with the evaluator on a regular basis. This meeting time was important, because the success of the evaluation ultimately depended on the support of the counselors.
2. A review of the literature yielded a vast amount of information about surveys and questionnaires that had been used in previous counseling program evaluations. The selection of surveys afforded a base from which to work and refine questions for this specific district.
3. The ready assistance and support of one of the key school counselors in this district also contributed to the success of the evaluation. This counselor encouraged others to support the evaluation efforts and provided qualitative information regarding the history and current processes of the counseling program.
4. Ongoing communication with counselors was also critical. Not only were meetings convened once a month, but counselors and the evaluator also exchanged electronic mail (e-mail) addresses, which created a reciprocal flow of conversation and information exchange between monthly meetings. E-mail also allowed the evaluator quickly to clarify unclear information provided on surveys or in interviews. Probably the most important function of e-mail communication was to arrange meetings, survey distributions and pickups, and overall management of the evaluation processes.

Although this evaluation appears to have accomplished its initial goals, the following lessons were learned that might improve such an evaluation in the future:

1. **Secure a commitment from the administrators to use the results for change.** Because it was the evaluator, not district administrators,

who instigated the evaluation, the central office administrators were not committed to making changes to improve the counseling services. They embraced the idea of an evaluation, but most likely did so in order to fulfill requirements from the state monitoring agencies. Because of their lack of commitment to change, it was difficult to involve administrators in the evaluation, even though it would have been desirable to have had ongoing meetings to discuss goals, objectives, processes, and progress of the evaluation (Worthen, Sanders, & Fitzpatrick, 1997, p. 199). The superintendent did not attend meetings regarding the evaluation, nor did he ever discuss any aspect of the evaluation with the evaluator. Therefore, it was not surprising that central administration did not take action on the evaluation results until the end of the following year.

2. **Enlist the support of the school board before beginning the evaluation.** Resources are limited in small, rural districts. Funding issues became particularly problematic when trying to relieve counselors of some of their administrative duties by hiring assistant principals. In this small district, the top three administrators in the central office managed all programs, including counseling, special education, gifted and talented, migrant, and Section 504. Their lack of commitment to change resulted in part from a lack of time and resources to obtain the necessary personnel and supplies. By enlisting school board members' support for restructuring the counseling program before beginning the evaluation, administrators would have been able to reprioritize their time and funding expenditures.
3. **Inform parents about the evaluation directly.** The poor return rate of surveys from the intermediate, middle, and high school students and parents was clearly not acceptable. More surveys were distributed at the high school than at all other schools together, but the fewest were returned from that school. Perhaps most parents did not read the monthly newsletter, or perhaps there was so much information in that particular newsletter that the surveys were not noticed. Another reason for the poor return rate may have been a lack of interest in, or information about, the counseling services at the high school. In order to maximize response rates, it might be important to contact parents directly, either face-to-face or by telephone, and educate them about the purposes of the evaluation. Another approach might be to distribute the surveys at school gatherings where parents are in attendance. The evaluator could also obtain the parents' permission to survey their children about the counseling services, thus allowing student surveys to be conducted at school.

Overall, the evaluation provided important information to the administration in this small rural district, but changes are likely to be slow due to the administrators' lack of funding, time, and commitment. The counselors, however, now have input from a variety of individuals about the services they provide and how they might be improved. Administrators are now aware of the developmental guidance model and how the counseling services in the school district compare to those recommended by the state education agency. The evaluation acted as a catalyst in transforming the traditional counseling services in this district into a developmental guidance model program.

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